

Whiteout

That we can be attending an international conference called “The Director in the Theatre World” is an obvious indication of how canonical the notion of the director has become. Part of the 20th century’s historical legacy for directing entails, of course, seeing the director as an *auteur* whose medium is the theatre itself. The director’s medium is not writing, not design, not working with actors per se, but the complex whole of the world of the theatre. Since we are in Russia, it is worth acknowledging Meyerhold’s theatricalist experiments as the first, most synthetic historical example of this nexus between the director as *auteur* and the theatre as a medium of self-referential exploration.

Now, however, this nexus is being revised from both directions. We still rely on authors, but as Barthes’ “Death of the Author” and other texts have long signaled, the author-effect does not necessarily demand that one person be that author, nor that the readerly reception of a work’s meaning treat authorial meaning as dominant.

Increasingly, many productions today that resemble past *auteur* and theatricalist productions, whether due to their signature style or to their concern with the realm of the theatre as a place of non-mimetic representation, are actually being made by collectives, rather than by a single director. Moreover, they often produce works which announce their openness in terms of the production of meaning; they invite audiences to do some work, but not necessarily in the sense of deciphering a hidden code.

While, in many cases, the notion of an authorial *director* has evolved into a distributed, rather than centralized model based around *directing practices*, the notion of theatre’s medium-specificity has also come to seem less self-consistent. Even before the

introduction of digital technology, but especially after, the Greenbergian aspiration to see art in terms of medium-specificity has lost some of its allure. Theatre was, in any case, always uneasily settled between different art forms, claims to its capacity as a unifying *Gesamtkunstwerk* notwithstanding.

So today, what is the picture? We may well have an artistic field that is evolving from "The Director in the Theatre World" to "Practices of Interpreting and Shaping between the Arts and between Media."

In that respect, I want to explore in this talk two companies who are loosely based in the "world of the theatre" and who exhibit many of the aesthetic hallmarks formerly associated with a signature directorial practice. Yet both have an unusual relationship to the notion of a singular director, and both groups' work ranges beyond the theatre into installation, sound art, video art, sculpture, digital art, and other aesthetic fields. The first group, which I will focus on more, is the Japanese company Dumb Type; the second is the Italian company Società Raffaello Sanzio (known as SRS).

In particular, I want to examine why a pattern exists, in both companies' work, of using forms of white space, white visual imagery, and white sound. In terms of the last two items, I am trying to refer to a range of "white" electronic visual signals and "white noise," examples of which I will show later. In general, these patterns of white fields and white signals appear to be traces of post-digital culture, as well as of what Katherine Hayles and others have identified as "posthuman" culture. In the book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich has suggested that one of the basic questions posed by new media interfaces concerns "how to merge database and narrative into a new form" (12). Both Dumb Type and SRS eschew narrative *per se*, but the work of both intersects with

the concerns raised by Manovich in the sense that they are trying to integrate duration-based modes of performance with the synoptic, database versions of culture now readily available through massively distributed electronic technology. Time, in both companies' performances, resembles more a series of collocated episodes in a database than traditional forms of plot.

In terms of this talk, if one were to make a database of analytic topics around the "white signs" common to both groups, the data fields might include metatags such as a) signal/noise ratios; b) the post-human and pre-human; c) the epistemology of dumbness; d) the notion of virtuality; e) new theatre as dynamic, time-based versions of op(tical)-art and sound art; and f) semiotic thresholds, whether sub-limens to meaning (i.e. the subliminal) or super-limens (i.e. the supernatural). These are some of the topics I want to explore.

On the broadest scenographic scale, one of the first things one notices about Dumb Type and SRS is a tendency to stage actions in predominantly white spaces. Throughout the various episodes of SRS's long-term project on tragedy, *Tragedia Endogonidia*, as well in earlier performances such as *Genesi: From the Museum of Sleep*, the setting frequently consists of an almost sepulchral, three-sided white box, formed by hanging opaque or translucent white curtains or by solid-white flats. Some practical and technical reasons for this whiteness certainly apply: to work between media by projecting film and video into a theatre space, one needs reflective white surfaces. But there may also be a historical tendency at work in these white spaces. If a "black box" has traditionally been a metonym for the art of the theatre, just as a "white cube" has been

a metonym for the gallery space of visual arts, then the interarts work of companies like SRS and Dumb Type may be operating in a field where the history of the gallery is being layered over and intersected with the history of the theatre. Notably, both dumb type and SRS are as comfortable staging installations in galleries and in creating books, videos, and DVD documents as they are in creating performances for theatrical venues. Dumb Type was founded in 1984; SRS in 1981. Both companies, in other words, have come of age in a period when the generic consistency of theatre as an art form seems less vital than the potentials for translation among the nebulous traces known as "media."

Dumb Type's scenographic spaces are not quite as emblematically "white cubes," but they do offer some important variations on the basic principle of staging within a predominantly white scenographic field. Moreover, a whole series of "white" optical and auditory patterns are displayed in Dumb Type's work. In the production that first made Dumb Type's reputation in Japan and abroad, the 1990 *pH*, the audience sits in a tennis court-like space, with seating raised on two sides above the narrow alley of the playing area. Walls at either end of this alley are made of blonde-colored wood, and periodically function as screens for projections. The white Marley dance floor of the alley itself also functions as a projection screen, as do the white costumes of the female performers in the piece. One obvious question raised by the piece, which the company's then director Teiji Furuhashi described as very "80s" in its issues, concerns humans' relation to a society of the spectacle, to a society that appears like a "precession of simulacra." That is, what if the human itself is a simulacrum, a projection cast by systemic, pervasive media?

In one of the group's later performances, *OR* (1995), a huge, curved white cyclorama stands in an end-stage relationship to the audience, embracing both the playing

space and, implicitly, the audience in its grasp. In both *pH* and *OR*, the scenic whiteness of the playing space evokes a variety of associations, mostly of abstracted and dessicated versions of quotidian space: the whiteness of a sanitized clean room where medical and engineering experiments occur; the official white walls of the interrogation room; the scrubbed repression of dirt in a white bathroom; the white space of a clinician's office; the palpitating, fluorescent white space of a refrigerator; or the long white aisles of a supermarket or pharmacy.

Finally, in one of the company's most recent performances, *Memorandum* (2000), the scenographic field is predominantly black; white projection screens have been replaced by translucent liquid-crystal membranes which function as both projection screens and lightly opaqued scrims. Yet, while white scenographic fields have diminished in *Memorandum* (the white dance floor and costumes of *pH*; the white cyclorama of *OR*), the images of electronic signals which were projected onto the screens of these earlier productions appear repeatedly on *Memorandum*'s membranes. These electronic signals, usually white or a whitish-green in appearance, include images of static; heart-monitor pulses; sine waves; horizontal lines like one sees in out-of-kilter v-hold frames taken from electronic monitors; and vertical moving bars reminiscent of optical scanners and copier machines.

Moreover, all these visual traces of screen and electronic signal culture are reiterated in all three pieces in the soundscapes created by reputed noise artist Ryoji Ikeda. Briefly, the elements in Ikeda's sound design range from pure sine tones, to the blips of heart monitors, to the crescendos of airplane take-offs, to techno rhythms, and even to the rare melody or harmony made out of these seemingly un-euphonious sources.

While all these white visual and sound traces function as signs of contemporary electronic-media culture, their rhetorical effect in performance has as much to do with perceptual intensity and repetitive insistence as it does with referentiality. These electronic signals and sound evoke the anonymity and machinic quality of modern medical, scientific, and commercial contexts. But they are also frequently experienced like optical and auditory implosions invoking primarily themselves: nervous messages whose sense of immediacy and persistence seem designed to be implanted literally onto the retina, onto the tympanic membrane of the ear, or within the explosive firing of the neural synapses. The ad-copy for *Memorandum* frequently quoted McLuhan – the “medium is the message” – and a similar thesis could be applied to *pH* and *OR*. As much as referential modes of messaging, Dumb Type’s white signals function as deictic, indexical gestures: look at this message, right there, whether or not you have the expertise to read it, you are in it. The signals are pervasive, immersive, and slightly opaque.

In that respect, the membranes used in *Memorandum* are interesting, in part, because they materialize technologically a kind of indeterminacy that always applied to the electronic white signals in Dumb Type’s previous productions. The membranes can be both screens and scrims, both reflective and translucent. Similarly, the white images of static, pulses, vertical lines, and horizontal bars and the white sounds of noise, blips, sine waves, and interference patterns anonymously erase themselves to show a signified “behind the scrim” and at the same time opaquely stop one’s seeing beyond the screen in order to reflect a different emptiness and evacuation, a whiteness that points to nothing but itself.

The quality of epistemological aporia present in this dance between semiotic and phenomenological modes, between signifying and sensing relates to the contemporary inundation of communication media. But it is not only about the technological. It also relates to aporias concerning the *bios*, the body, and the human. White signals also function in Dumb Type's work as a sign and pulse on the borders of biological life and death.

Dumb Type's first director, Teiji Furuhashi, died of AIDS in 1995 before the completion of the group's 1995 performance *OR*. However, Furuhashi's concerns about mortality and his ideas about how to represent them served as the cornerstones for the piece's creation. Furuhashi was a principal *auteur* for the piece even though he was not present for all the rehearsals or the final performances of the piece and even though Dumb Type's mission, since its inception, had been to integrate the multi-disciplinary skills and interests of the diverse artists composing the collective.

Furuhashi originally conceived of the life-and-death themes of *OR* when confronted not only with his own coming death, but with a series of other deaths around him. Furuhashi's brother had died in a car accident, his lover from AIDS, and ultimately Furuhashi also had the experience of witnessing his own mother's death in the hospital following a bout with cancer. When his mother's heart stopped, Furuhashi apparently realized it only because the signal on her life-support machine had ceased. When doctors administered blows to her heart and air to her mouth, only momentarily starting her heart-beat again, Furuhashi felt intimately the tenuous boundary between life and death mediated by technology and the human will. In a series of notes about the experience, Furuhashi laid out the initial premises of *OR*:

It is about the state of 'white out,' like in the blizzard
where you are deprived of the ability to see
[...] where you may not know whether you are alive OR dead
[...] What is it?" (Quoted in Gendrich and Hood 7).

OR's "'gray humor' reflection on the border(s) between life and death" (Gendrich and Hood 5) concerns an epistemological aporia, a "whiteout." What is the limit between life and death, but also what is the limit between the human and posthuman? Dumb Type's earlier performance *pH* had examined notions of post-history (Gendrich and Hood 5) and the posthuman in terms of how media and technology mediate contemporary human relations; how they turn humans into objects, commodities, and projected beings disembodied through the constant circulation of information systems. As *OR* raises questions about the boundary between inorganic machines and organic bodies on the threshold of life and death, the piece at first seems to emphasize the disembodied, anonymous, ghostly quality of the posthuman body. And yet, as the piece progresses, the material, embodied quality of the human reappears. Performers in the piece never speak when they are on-stage – to that extent, the cultural and linguistic human seems disembodied from the physically human. Yet, while onstage, the performers do utter, groan, cry, and make other guttural sounds. In other words, deprived of the seemingly human ability to deploy linguistic signs, they still convey signals, signals which re-emphasize the material apparatus and expressivity of the human body even as they reside in a gray zone in relation to signification.

What these uncommunicative figures communicate, in part, is the difficulty of transforming information into understanding. Contemporary information society relies on the technological distinction between sign (the unity of signifier/signified) and signal (bearer of information). As Katherine Hayles points out in *How We Became Posthuman*, when Claude Shannon proposed the first tenets of information theory he marked a sharp division between information and its material substrates, making a "strong distinction between message and signal" (18). *pH* and *OR* embody that distinction, without yet restoring a sense of narrative understanding that would transcend the glut of information and signals. Furuhashi's last major piece working in rehearsal with Dumb Type, *S/N* (1993), also explored a related distinction about the apparatus of communication and information media: the relationship between (S)ignal and (N)oise.

To summarize, Dumb Type form part of a genealogy of modern performance and art – from Samuel Beckett through Robert Wilson and others – concerned with the tangible expression of aporia, the representation of unknowing, the aesthetics of silence. But we can also see some of the historical specificity of Dumb Type's particular version of unknowing: they represent a new post-digital, posthuman information society form of aesthetic aporia. The very name of the group derives from a willingness to play dumb, to be mute, but also to reveal their unknowing in the face of a contemporary information overload that exceeds understanding. As Furuhashi put it in an interview with Dorinda Neave, "The name Dumb Type alludes to the problems of a society 'overstuffed with information but cognizant of nothing'" (85).

In a similar vein, SRS has commented on numerous occasions about their own desire for an aesthetics of stupefaction and stupidity, a desire to confront audiences with a

childlike state of pre-linguistic incapacity. In SRS member Chiara Guidi's notes on an experimental theatre school for children that she led, she comments that the experiences in the school were "Come stare di fronte a un mito senza tempo . . . a una visione che ammutolisce" (Guidi 46), like being in front of a timeless myth . . . a vision which makes one mute. Or at another point, "C'è lo stupore della meraviglia, del meraviglioso" (20); it is the stupefaction of the miracle, of the marvelous. Or as Claudia Castellucci, the principal theorist within the company, remarks:

The age of supremacy of the logic word is over, the logic word which logically, with Beckett, ends handing itself over to its own draining. Do we want to keep on thinking that words help men to understand each other? Do we still have this nineteenth-century idea of word?

To evoke the material sensation of this muteness, dumbness, and aporia, Dumb Type and SRS have evolved an entire scenography and stagecraft which exists at the border of semiosis. Their signals are not wholly signifiers and not wholly silent, not quite messages but not quite noise either. In SRS's case this aporia often feels archaic, not just a post-human condition, but a pre-human one as well. The company's use of children, animals, and automata seems aligned with a desire to examine communicative entities that are nonetheless prior to language.¹ Dumb Type's work, by comparison,

¹ Alan Read dwells on these figures in his essay "L'infante, l'animale, gli automi" in *Epitaph* (2003). Matthew Causey, in an article comparing the work of SRS and Eduardo Kac, relates both to Hayles' work on the post-human.

resides for the most part within the abstracted quotidian of posthuman information society.

The constructed silences of Dumb Type and SRS concern liminal relations to perception and meaning, as well as liminal relations to memory. For both groups, somewhat like Robert Wilson's early work, historical memory resides less in an encounter with historical narrative than with random access to a database. In Dumb Type's *Memorandum*, one section of optical and sound effects are accompanied by a voice-over of male and female British voices, who say, "all out / erase my memory / welcome to the next level / just float / believe blindly / set me to zero." If, as Jameson put it, postmodernity is marked by an amnesia about history, Dumb Type sets that amnesia within the context of information flows that exceed signification and hence exceed the capacity to elicit meaning out of history's rush. Describing *Memorandum*, critic Akira Asada writes:

No, more than mere memory, about the loss of memory. [...] The memories of individual lives [...] now overflowing their storylines in the flood of information that has come with the amassing of digitised random access memory [...]. [...] It is especially this latter new amnesia due to information excess that *memorandum* sets forth on stage [...]. [...] The speed and density with which that flow press[es] at the threshold of human perception, it all approaches the pure white of overexposed film. (Asada 66-67)

The piece articulates an unsatisfiable desire for a degree zero, a whiteout, of memory. It demonstrates – in an ironic, but affectless way – a desire to inoculate oneself against history or, even more, to amputate oneself from one's own incapacity to read history, in order merely to linger and float in the flow of perception free from the desire to elicit meaning out of history's excess.

Yet it is, of course, impossible to achieve this kind of erasure. Two weeks ago I had the opportunity to see the premiere of SRS's London episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, the ninth episode in the project. One moment in particular powerfully manifested how impossible it is to inoculate one's self against perception and memory. While the word "inoculation" derives from the negation of what is noxious, it is tempting to imagine it as indicating the negation of the ocular, and the following moment in the London episode seemed to play on the tragic's sense that neither the noxious nor the visible can be avoided.

In a transitional sequence between two major sections of the piece, a white curtain closed over the fourth wall of the piece's scenographic white cube. A woman's voice then issued over the speakers, repeatedly whispering in a mysterious, perhaps slightly taunting tone, "Don't Look." And yet, the opaque scrim itself barred the audience from actually seeing what was happening during the set change. Then, suddenly, a high-intensity photographic flash, accompanied by the sound of a machine-like explosion, burst from behind the scrim. This continued, slowly and insistent. If one disobeyed the voice and asserted one's right to look the spectacle in the face, one was momentarily blinded by a white-out. And yet, a curious thing happened if one obeyed and closed one's eyelids. Instead of the eye experiencing a white-out, a flower of red exploded

across the retina, a flower with a dark blind spot in the middle where the pupil resides and with tendrils of red reaching out from the pupil where the veins of the eye are.

In a sense the moment realized materially how seeing is never only optical, even at the borders of optical art. That is to say, the voice-over's injunction and prohibition on looking always structured one's look, whether one decided to see or not. In psychoanalytic terms, the look is not the gaze, but is always structured by the gaze. So whether one disobeyed and chose to look or obeyed and chose not to look, one still saw and one was still blinded. Moreover, the moment materialized how the *theatron*, the place of seeing that is theatre, usually occupies a space of optical unconsciousness. Even when one did not look, one experienced a vision, reminding one, perhaps, that the place of seeing is never really on the stage, but on the unconscious *limen* between the eye and the world, on the screen of the retina.

Dumb Type's interest in the threshold between sensing and understanding, between signal and signification also occupies a kind of optical unconscious, although perhaps in a more typically Benjaminian sense, understood as mediated by mechanisms of mechanical reproduction. Concerning *OR*, Yukiko Shikata writes:

The 'image-machine' in *OR* made consummate use of digital technologies to transcend human perception and will into the realm of the 'digital retina' and of speed itself. The visuals captured by the electronic eye at 1/10000-second digital video shutter speeds were just barely visible when converted to humanly perceptible speeds of 30 frames per second, all digital noise generated without intervention of the human eye showing up

as 'quietly crazed image' (TAKATANI) whiteouts. Time sliced to the maximum by digital effects generated possibilities for machinic perception, which slide across our consciousness in the form of whiter [sic] noise intrusions and digitally exposed [Benjamin's] 'optical unconsciousness'. (Shikata 33)

From the burst of the photographic flash to the blur of the 1/10000-second digital video shutter, SRS and Dumb Type play with the way perception exceeds understanding. They also show how our understanding has created a technological world that exceeds perception.

In the work of Dumb Type and SRS, whiteouts are a kind of information blindness positioned at the gaps between three points: the sign-bond of signifier/signified, the bare signal without message, and the pairing of signal/noise. Moreover, to the extent that the information overload of the whiteout relies on the technological mediation of perception, moments of whiteout evoke a contemporary episteme of the posthuman in which the organic and inorganic intermingle; where the human exists in a state of virtuality in which information systems have thoroughly suffused the material body; where information threatens to overwhelm its material substrates and disembody the human, even as the technique of information overload can highlight, through contrast, the materiality and expressivity of the human body. Put another way, the dumb blindness of the whiteout invokes the humanness of dumbness, the silent yet communicating body, the body with its pre-linguistic cries of nature beloved of Rousseau, cries that seem to exist prior to our capacity for language. And just as the

cry lies on the border between signal and signifier, so too the optical- and auditory-art effects of dumb type and SRS occupy another set of semiotic thresholds: boundary states within and between the subliminal and supernatural.

In his recent book concerning sound art, David Toop uses the title *Haunted Weather* to evoke how new experiments in sound often explore "the subtle and subliminal characteristics of the physical environment or [...] almost supernatural communications" (2). In this context of new "optical art for the ears" (13), as he calls it, our global and globalized weather is haunted by hundreds of fragments of local experience, "too many sounds making too much noise" (3). Whiteouts, it could be said, also evoke a haunting. They are ghosts somewhere between theatre and performance, story and data entry, signal and sign, sensation and cognition, environment and experience.

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